

Biases influence how multiracial individuals are categorized

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Sample morphed multiracial faces from the racial-categorization task. Credit: Ho et al.

Throughout U.S. history, individuals who were part-white and part-black were typically treated as black, a tendency that has been called the "one-

drop rule."

New University of Michigan research, published in *Psychological Science*, demonstrates that this bias, also known as hypodescent, persists in the U.S., and is driven in part by anti-black attitudes and beliefs about the genetic basis of [race](#).

"Our research offers a window into the psychological mechanisms that govern how we categorize others when we are confronted with individuals who blend identities differing in social status," said Arnold Ho, U-M assistant professor of psychology and organizational studies.

In the first of two studies, Ho and U-M colleagues Steven Roberts and Susan Gelman surveyed nearly 150 [white](#) Americans about race, asking respondents about their feelings toward both African-Americans and whites, and about their beliefs concerning whether [racial categories](#) are biologically determined.

The researchers also asked survey respondents to categorize multiracials (as relatively black or white, or equally black and white), and found that respondents who believed that racial categories are biologically determined and had negative feelings about African-Americans, were most likely to believe that black-white multiracials are primarily black.

The second study, involving 121 white American participants, was designed to manipulate whether individuals think about race as biologically determined. This study also measured feelings toward African-Americans and whites, and asked participants to categorize 20 racially ambiguous faces as black, black-white multiracial, or white. Participants who were exposed to the idea that race can be biologically determined, and who harbored anti-black biases, were more likely to categorize faces as black, Ho said.

"Multiracial [individuals](#) make up a rapidly growing population, and they often identify in ways that do not reflect traditional '[black](#)' or 'white' categories," said Roberts, a U-M doctoral candidate in psychology. "However, our data show that biological concepts of race and intergroup biases prevent people from thinking about race more flexibly."

More information: "Essentialism and Racial Bias Jointly Contribute to the Categorization of Multiracial Individuals" *Psychological Science* 0956797615596436, first published on September 1, 2015 [DOI: 10.1177/0956797615596436](#)

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